

A Look Back at 1988

Everyone associated with the 1988 Wichita State baseball program will remember the strike that never happened, the one pitch that could have put the Shockers in the game to decide college baseball's national champion.

Likely to be forgotten is the path taken by Coach Gene Stephenson's scrappy band of batters to reach that fateful ninth inning against the Arizona State Sun Devils in the College World Series.

With the exception of All-American outfielder Tim Raley, All-Missouri Valley Conference designated hitter Rick Olivas and pitchers Rich McIntyre and Shawn Pumphrey, the Shockers returned virtually everybody in 1988 from a team which recorded a 59-20 record and advanced to the NCAA West I Regional the year before.

"I think we're in a great position," said Stephenson prior to the season. "Barring any real difficult injury situations, this should be a very good college team."

As it is every year, Wichita State's goal entering the 1988 season was with a CWS championship. For four players — seniors Mark Standiford, Dan Raley, David Haas and Shane Durham — 1988 represented the final opportunity for a CWS title. It also represented their final chance

to avenge a 10-6 setback to Oklahoma State in the finals of the 1985 NCAA Midwest Regional.

The Shockers opened the season at nationally-ranked Nevada-Las Vegas and came away with 14-5 and 8-0 wins in the first two games before suffering a 24-9 loss in game No. 3. Stephenson's bunch then returned to Wichita and won two of three from New Mexico before embarking on a six-game trip through Texas.

After losing two of its first three games at Texas Tech and Hardin-Simmons, Wichita State put together a season-high 15-game winning streak, which included a three-game sweep of then No. 7 Louisiana State in late March.

April saw the Shockers move into newly-renovated Eck Stadium-Tyler Field. Standiford immediately found the new surroundings to his liking as he matched a Shocker record with three home runs in an 8-3 win over Nebraska, the Shockers' fourth game on their new field. A week later Raley provided the heroics, slamming a memorable and improbable inside-the-park home run in the bottom of the ninth inning against Oral Roberts, lifting the Shockers to an emotional 7-6 triumph.

After opening Missouri Valley Conference play



Photo: Gregory Drezdon

Head coach Gene Stephenson and seniors Dan Raley, Mark Standiford and David Haas celebrate after the Shockers' 15-5 win over Oklahoma State in the championship game of the Midwest Regional in Stillwater. The win was extra sweet for Raley, Haas, Standiford and classmate Shane Durham, all of whom were freshmen when the Cowboys downed Wichita State 10-6 in the finals of the 1985 Midwest Regional.

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with a split of four games at Indiana State, the Shockers ventured the next weekend to Normal, Ill., for four games with Illinois State. Two losses Saturday dropped Wichita State's league record to 2-4 and seemingly left the Shockers with a slim chance of repeating as MVC champions. But the Shockers got gutty pitching performances from junior Pat Cedeno and freshman Morgan LeClair the next day, sweeping the double-header 8-3 and 10-7 and moving back into contention.

The Shockers' regular-season battles with Oklahoma State are a highlight in any year, and 1988 was no different. In Stillwater, Okla., the Shockers held leads on three different occasions, but each time the No. 1-ranked Cowboys rallied, the final time for an 8-7 win.

The following week in Wichita, the attraction of watching the No. 1-ranked team in the country drew 5,126 fans to Eck Stadium-Tyler Field, a record for Wichita State and college baseball in Kansas. Eric Wedge staked the Shockers to a 4-2 lead with a three-run homer in the fifth inning, but the Cowboys rallied once again for a 9-4 win.

The Shockers returned home the last two weeks of April for Valley confrontations against Bradley and Southern Illinois and swept four games from both teams, setting up a showdown with the Creighton Bluejays in Omaha, Neb., for the MVC title. Both teams entered play that

weekend with 12-4 conference marks and the Shockers needed three victories to claim the MVC regular-season title for the third time in four years.

Wichita State squeaked out a 7-6 win in the series-opener with Jeff Bonacquist delivering an RBI single in the top of the ninth for the winning run. The Shockers followed that with a 19-5 rout in the nightcap, slamming five home runs in their best power display of the season.

The title-clincher, the game that served — in the minds of the Shockers — as the catalyst for the closing stretch drive came in Sunday's opener. Trailing 3-1 with nobody on and two outs in the top of the ninth, the Shockers rallied for five runs and a dramatic 6-4 victory. Standiford drove in the go-ahead runs with his 91st career double, matching the NCAA career double record held by former Shocker All-American Phil Stephenson, and Wedge added insurance runs with a two-run single.

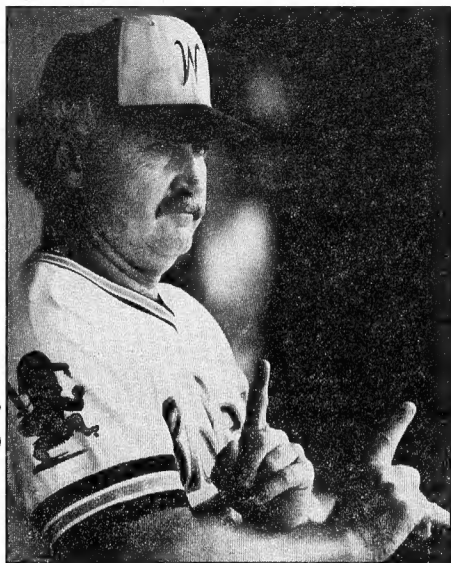
The victory was the 600th in Gene Stephenson's illustrious career, giving him the distinction of being the only college baseball coach to reach the 600-win plateau in his 11th season. In winning the nightcap 12-2, Wichita State capped a record 14-game conference winning-streak, became the first team to win the league title despite playing 12 of 20 games on the road and ended MVC play at 16-4, the best record in MVC play since the Valley implemented its present regular-season format in 1984.

Wichita State wrapped up the regular-season with a three-game sweep of Seton Hall, its final tuneup prior to playing host to the MVC tournament. The Shockers rallied past Indiana State 7-5 in the first round, stopped Bradley 6-3 in the second round and then topped Creighton 11-5 in the winner's bracket final, setting the stage for a rematch with the Bluejays in the championship round.

Rain plagued play during the entire tournament, and when the rain started falling again in the ninth inning with the championship game tied 3-3, play was called by Interim MVC Commissioner Joe Mitch, who later that night declared the Shockers as the MVC representative in the NCAA tournament when the game was unable to be resumed.

Then came the anxious waiting for a regional assignment. Would the Shockers get a No. 1 seed? Where would they be sent? As the 8th-ranked team in the country, Wichita State thought it deserved consideration as a No. 1 seed. The NCAA disagreed, however, and sent the Shockers to Stillwater as the No. 2-seed behind top-ranked and homestanding Oklahoma State, a situation with which Wichita State was not unfamiliar, having played in Midwest Regionals in Stillwater in 1983 and 1985.

Photo: Gregory Drezdson



Gene Stephenson signals a defensive play to his fielders during the Shockers' championship game victory over Oklahoma State, a win which put Wichita State in the College World Series for the second time in seven years.

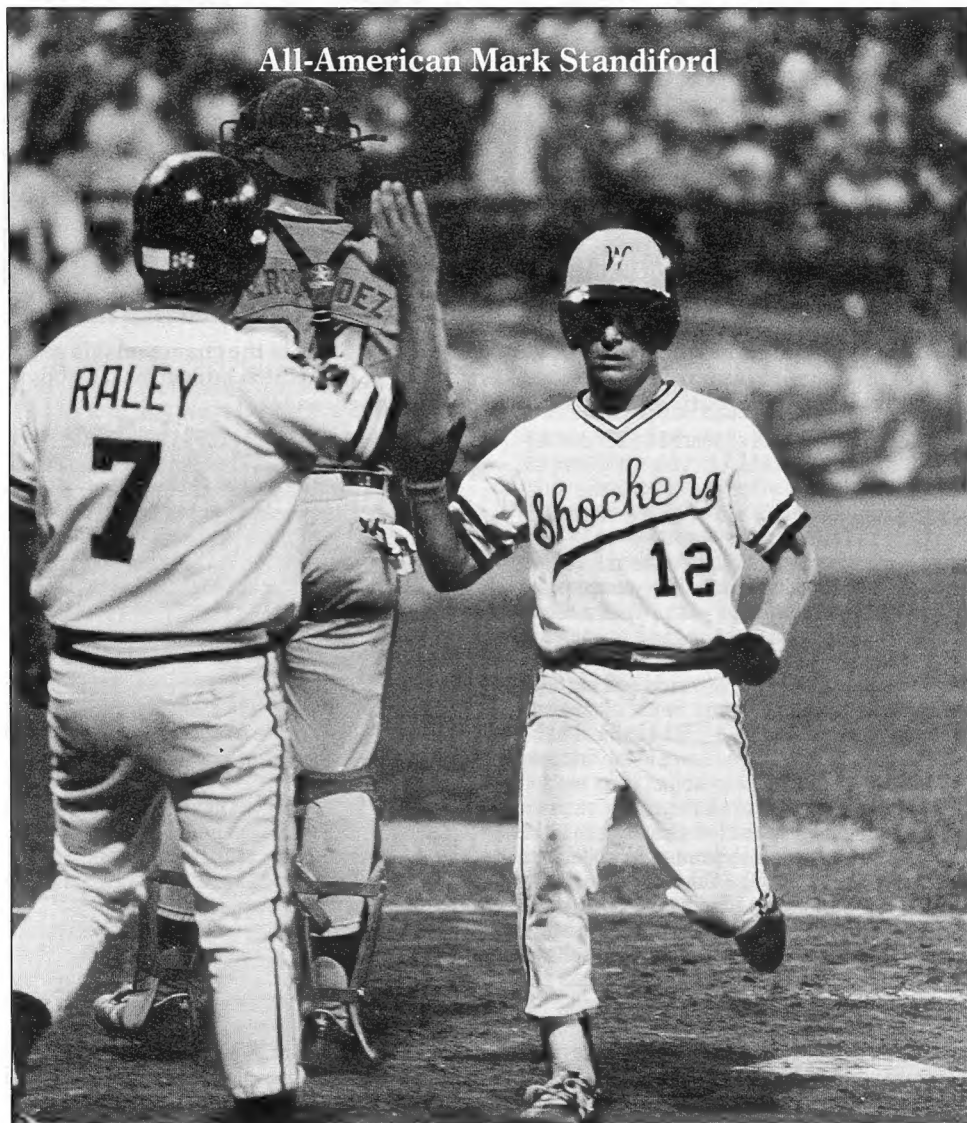
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played a cruel trick on the Shockers that inning, leaving their heads shaking in bewilderment.

Twice Haas was within one strike of the third out and a Shocker victory, but Sun Devil short-stop Pat Listach, who had gone down on strikes twice earlier in the game, slapped a hanging 0-2 curve into left field to drive in the tying run. Arizona State went on to win the game 4-3 in the 10th inning, scoring the winning run against

Newlin.

The double-elimination format afforded the Shockers another chance at the Sun Devils, but in reality, Wichita State had already thrown its knockout punch and came up empty. Arizona State ended the Shockers' dream two nights later, cashing in on five Shocker errors and 23 hits for a 19-1 victory.



All-American Mark Standiford

Second baseman Mark Standiford capped an outstanding career with an All-American season in 1988, clouting a Wichita State record 28 home runs and driving in 97 runs. A three-time All-Missouri Valley Conference selection, Standiford ranks as the Shockers' career home run leader with 69 and the NCAA career double leader with 94.

Photo: Gregory Drezdon